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ABSTRACT

There is little consistent research available on cultural rejection and re-identification in minority group members, but this report uses case study material to extrapolate three general factors precipitating rejection: self-hatred and negative chauvinism, quality of ethnic experience and rejection of religious experience. A four-step model for cultural re-identification is developed: (1) the individual must become aware of personal feelings about his own ethnic identity; (2) he must realize the psychological impossibility of escaping, avoiding or denying his minority membership; (3) he must be exposed to a different and more favorable view of the cultural content of his heritage; (4) he must find a personal relevancy and purpose for the practice of and identification with his heritage. (Author)

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Cultural Rejection and Re-identification in Minority Group Members

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The study of race relations in social psychology has seen a radical refocusing in the past decade. The earlier work of Adorno et al. (1950) on the authoritarian personality, Deutsch and Collins (1951) on interracial housing and Allport (1954) on the nature of prejudice - all oriented towards understanding and changing the prejudiced individual - has been replaced by an interest in the psychological effects of prejudice on the minority member. Of particular concern has been the question of identity rejection among minority group members. This phenomenon has been identified and studied in relation to various racial, ethnic and religious minorities (Lewin, 1948; Banks and Grambs, 1972; Lovegrove and Pool, 1975; Bagley and Verma, 1975). Of equal concern has been the reversal of this process, the identity transformation or cultural re-awakening in the minority member. Various authors (Crawford and Naditch, 1970; Wallace, 1964; Sherif and Sherif, 1970; Cross, 1970) have developed models of this process, primarily in relation to the identity transformations resulting from the Black Power movements of the late 1960's.

The area lacks a basic coherent approach to the problem, however. First, empirical studies aimed at identifying causal or precipitating factors in ethnic rejection have focused primarily on psychodynamic processes, largely ignoring cognitive and situational ones. Second, these studies do not in any consistent way address the problem of

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re-identification. Third, most programs aimed at cultural re-awakening are ideologically, rather than scientifically based. Fourth, such programs or descriptions of them are seldom concerned with nor derived from specific precipitating factors.

In the present study the author attempts to identify the critical variables leading to cultural rejection in the American Jew and, in relation to these, develop a generalizable methodology for cultural re-identification. The approach used in both aspects of this work was phenomenological in nature. Causal factors were unearthed by a trend analysis of individual subjects' experiences with and feelings about their own ethnicity. The resulting transformation model is based on altering subjective and inner dynamics; feelings, belief systems, valuing and interpretive processes. The findings were extrapolated from case study materials on adolescent and young adults of American Jewish heritage collected in individual counseling sessions, small therapeutically oriented consciousness-raising groups and academic courses on Jewish Identity.

Three general factors surfaced as critical to the process of cultural rejection in the American Jewish context. These included: 1) a dynamic of self-hatred and negative chauvanism; 2) the non-fulfilling nature of the Jewish experience itself; and 3) a mistrust and rejection of religious experience and ritual which generalizes to other cultural spheres as well.

The first factor, potentially operative in all minority situations, represents the individual's internalization of the majority culture's negative attitude towards his own ethnicity. On the basis of this precept the person is likely to develop a negative chauvanism, rejecting, and reacting with either hostility or apathy, to anything

he identifies as Jewish, including himself.

The second factor concerns the character of the Jewish cultural and religious experience in many contemporary communities. As a precipitant of ethnic rejection, this factor has taken one of two forms: 1) an unfeeling and unexplained orthodoxy of blind rule-following and observance, and 2) a cultural blend of muted ethnicity and affluent values. Neither presents a satisfying psychological experience to the young Jew. As a consequence, he frequently rejects it.

The third factor derives from the ghetto-bound Jew's penchant for worldliness. In the hope of transcending the limiting nature of his own ethnicity, he is drawn to the pervasive epistomology of the outside world, scientific rationalism. From such a stance he finds it necessary to reject the religious aspects of his heritage and ultimately generalizes this contempt to all things Jewish. The last two factors may also hold some relevance beyond the Jewish context, to other ethnic group situations in the case of the former and to other religious minorities in the case of the latter.

In light of these three factors and extensive experience in the data-collecting situations described above, the author has evolved a four-step sequence of interventions aimed at cultural re-awakening. Each stage may be facilitated by various therapeutic techniques and experiences, many borrowed from the Human Potential movement in psychology. The use of specific interventions will, however, depend on individual needs of the facilitator and the target minority population.

1) The individual must become aware of personal feelings, especially negative ones (conflict, anger, embarrassment), about his own ethnic identity. These largely unconscious reactions must be

brought into conscious awareness, and the target individual must understand their specific etiologies. This stage can best be accomplished in a small therapeutically-oriented discussion group, charged with the task of reacting openly to various stimulus experiences. Examples include writing ethnic autobiographies, responding to identity checklists and open-ended questions, reading research reports and articles on minority groupdynamics and participation in fantasy and role-playing situations.

2) The individual must realize the psychological impossibility of escaping, avoiding or denying his minority membership. This can be accomplished through the use of various didactic devices focusing on the all-pervasive impact of culture, the external definition of ethnicity and the role of one's past in the self-discovery process.

3) The individual must be exposed to a different and more favorable view of the cultural content of his heritage. Through the process of attitude change, his present belief system which reflects a limited and distorted experience of his heritage must be replaced by a more positive and veridical one. Extensive readings and actual immersion in ethnic-related situations more fulfilling than those typically experienced by the subject may be useful at this stage.

4) The individual must find a personal relevancy and purpose for the practice of and identification with his heritage. This can best be accomplished by showing the subject how various aspects of his ethnicity can function to satisfy personal needs currently unfulfilled in his life. Methods borrowed from values clarification, rational-emotive and other existential therapies may be most appropriate here.

Although this model was developed in relation to a particular minority population, the underlying problems it addresses and processes

it involves may be relevant to other minority groups and situations.

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